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Voluntary Public

Date: 5/17/2011

GAIN Report Number: FR9067

France

Post: Paris

Chief USDA Scientist Gets Scientific View of Biotechnology in France

Report Categories:

Biotechnology

Biotechnology and Other New Production

Technologies

Climate Change

Food Security

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Report Highlights:

Despite its reputation as an anti-biotechnology country, there are many in France considering plant biotechnology as a tool to address global needs and challenges in terms of climate change, food security, energy needs, and sustainable agriculture. The recent visit of Dr. Roger Beachy, Director of USDA's National Institute for Agriculture (NIFA), was an opportunity to let the "quiet ones" express themselves. From collaboration between national French and U.S. national research institutes, to parliamentary work and questioning of past decisions, there are many in France whose actions are not advertized by the media, but who are in line with U.S. perspectives on crop biotechnology.

Executive Summary:

On May 2-6, 2011, USDA/FAS Paris co-organized various high-level meetings and two seminars for Dr. Roger Beachy, Director, National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), in collaboration with the French National Research Institute in Agriculture (INRA) and with the local authority of the Moselle region. The purpose of the visit was to illustrate the crucial need for green biotechnology to meet global challenges, including food safety and security, climate change and new energy needs towards a more sustainable agriculture. Linking food security with national security and using genetics rather than chemicals to achieve these goals were key elements of Dr. Beachy's perspectives.

This visit followed an earlier visit of Dr. Beachy to Paris in September 2010, where he successfully participated in a round table with other speakers of the French government, farmers groups and development foundations focusing on ways to combine sustainable agriculture and food security (for more information, see [report FR9050](#), dated 10/14/2010).

In May 2011, Dr. Beachy developed his perspectives before an audience of approximately 70 people in INRA's headquarters in Paris, and in a conference organized by a local authority in the Moselle region (Eastern France) before an audience of approximately 150 people. Audiences included scientists, students, researchers, the agro-food and seed industries, farmer groups, French government and Parliamentarians (National Senate and Assembly), and the press.

[Please visit FAS/Paris website on Dr. Beachy's visit.](#)

General Information:**Common INRA and NIFA Perspectives on Research – Current and Potential Collaboration**

At both conferences with Dr. Beachy, NIFA's and INRA's plant biotechnology priorities and research strategies were compared. The President and DG of INRA presented work and priorities in plant biotechnology. While INRA had remained silent on this technology until their biotech fan-leaf disease resistant grapevines were destroyed in 2009 and 2010 (see [report FR9046](#), dated 08/19/2010), they strongly reacted to the destructions of their open-field research when that happened, and now dared to explain their plant biotechnology perspectives in two different public events with Dr. Roger Beachy. The President of INRA insisted on a strong France-U.S. research partnership, and said the United States is the country with whom INRA collaborates the most. She said France will propose, under its current Presidency of the G20, a global collaboration on wheat research programs (this has indeed occurred). INRA works on the bioeconomy as NIFA does, in order to "find ways to produce more, better, and something else." INRA's thematic focus is close to NIFA's, and includes (1) combining agriculture, environment and economy, (2) assuring healthy and sustainable food systems, (3) providing renewable carbon systems, and (4) adapting to and mitigating climate change. However, INRA considers other ways than genetic engineering in terms of innovation, as open field trials of biotech crops are almost impossible to conduct in France.

The INRA Director General stated that environmental legislation (named "Grenelle") adopted in the past few years by the French Government and which resulted in France's national ban on the cultivation of genetically engineered corn in 2008, actually raised interests and expectations in France for research in plant biotechnology, for example aiming to find production systems with lower inputs, or to adapt

crop production to new climate change conditions.

He described two projects currently involving INRA in green biotech research: first, a public/private partnership research program created ten years ago under the name “Genoplante” and changed to “Green Biotechnology” (in French, “Biotechnologies Vertes”), principally involved in crop genomics. Second, INRA is involved in the national program for research and higher education announced in December 2009 called “Invest for the Future” (in French “Investissements d’Avenir”), and with a total budget of 35 billion euros. Two green biotech programs lead by INRA were selected as part of this program: an eight-year, 9 million euros program to select corn varieties with high yields and reduced needs in water supply and chemical inputs, and a nine-year, 9 million euros program to select high yield, high quality, and stress-tolerant wheat varieties, for a more sustainable production.

[Please visit INRA’s website on Dr. Beachy’s visit at INRA.](#)

French Parliamentary Perspectives – Some Expectations from Plant Biotechnology

Dr. Beachy met with four French Parliamentarians, including Gerard Larcher, Senator and President of the Senate; Gerard Cesar, Senator and rapporteur of the French agricultural law; Claude Gatignol, Representative and Vice-President of the Science Committee of the Parliament; and Jean-Yves Le Deaut, Representative and author of numerous discussions on biotechnology in the Parliament over the past 15 years.

The views expressed by this group included that French consumers fear to be poisoned with biotech products, an ancient fear in a country where food has a strong cultural basis, therefore the current political freeze on this issue. In private, one parliamentarian admitted “we (in other words, French policy makers) have not always been brave in that respect, even within my own political party.” When asked about science and politics, he was sure science and politics were not on the same line. However, he pointed hormone-treated beef as a negative example of a technology promoted by scientists but rejected by policy makers. Note: hormone-treated beef continues to suffer from a negative image in France.

Another favored continuing open-field research on biotech plants, and condemned test plot destructions. According to him, France is now running late in terms of research in biotechnology, which is a “ridiculous” position in Europe, because of the actions of activists and ecologists, which opinions appear in the media. He believed that it will be problematic to feed 9 billion people in 2050 without plant biotechnology.

In another discussion, one suggested changing the “toxic” name of “GMO” – which is misunderstood by the general public - to Genetically Enhanced Products. He believed organic and biotechnology should be partners, and not enemies, and that genetically enhanced plants could be considered as “organic plus” or “super organic” plants. He was especially interested in new varieties of vegetables (mainly carrots, leaks and potatoes) that could be made self-resistant to nematodes, flies and diseases thanks to green biotechnology, based on his constituency’s sanitary issues. He expressed his concern about intellectual property and the patent system, different from the Plant Certificate used in Europe. Finally, he favored biotech research on environmental and health issues in order to be better perceived by the public in France.

Finally, the last parliamentarian conducted an official hearing of Dr. Beachy as part of his current official Parliamentary mission on the public perception and fear of biotechnology. He will prepare a report in the next few months based on the various consultations he will have had on this topic. His objective for this report is to set a scale of risks, to provide citizens with means to make their own opinion. He expects his report will conclude that the negative perception of biotechnology in France is linked with the counter-productive communication campaigns by some biotech companies. For this report, the parliamentarian needs references reports testifying to the reduction of chemical use as a result of the cultivation of biotech crops. Interestingly, he made a strong statement when he publicly denounced the French High Biotech Council's document recommending banning biotech corn cultivation in France in 2008, as this "affected the credibility of the scientific and political expertise." (see [report FR8008](#), dated 6/6/2008)

French Initiatives Promoting Innovation and Productivity through Plant Biotechnology

Although less in the media than activists, there are some initiatives in France promoting the use of plant biotechnology to address global needs and challenges. For example, a large number of scientists united in the French Association of Plant Biotechnology (in French, "Association Francaise des Biotechnologies Vegetales," or [AFBV](#)), to create another voice in the public discussion on this issue than activists and private companies. Many of these scientists consider their opinion or research results have not been taken into consideration by French policy makers and have expressed their concerns that political decisions are not based on science, especially when France implemented its national ban on biotech corn cultivation in 2008.

AFBV presented their to-be-released-shortly book on plant biotechnology to Dr. Beachy, and invited him to the seminar they will organize to officially release the book next September in the National Assembly. This book, entitled "Plant Biotechnology – Environment, Food and Health" was written under the direction of Agnes Ricroch (Professor in the AgroParisTech University), Yvette Dattee (member of France's Academy of Agriculture, honorary Director of Research in INRA, and member of AFBV's board of Directors), and Dr. Marc Fellous (Professor emeritus in human genetics in Paris VII, President of AFBV).

Results of the Visit

We have no illusions that attitudes in France can change quickly. However, this visit gave both voice and courage to policy makers and researchers. A top advisor in the Ministry of Agriculture has proposed creating a foundation (NGO) to promote an accurate and science-based portrayal of new technologies, including biotechnology. We will closely follow this development.